

Caterpillar workers reject sellout contract

What is the UAW and whom does it represent?

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The Caterpillar workers' rejection of the contract signed by the United Auto Workers underscores the antagonism between the interests of rank-and-file workers and the official union organizations that claim to represent them. The brazenly pro-company deal agreed to by the UAW is only the most recent in a long line of union-management agreements undermining the jobs, working conditions, wages and benefits of workers while boosting the profits of the corporations.

The contract, which covers 12,000 workers in Illinois, Pennsylvania, Colorado and Tennessee, was voted down by a 58 percent margin. Outside one voting location in East Peoria, Illinois, the site of Caterpillar's largest facility, dozens of workers distributed leaflets calling for rejection. One carried a sign which read, "Vote no or sell yourself into slavery." Others denounced the UAW for selling them out.

For nearly six-and-a half years Caterpillar workers have been without a contract. Over this period the UAW leadership has called off strikes not once, but twice. The first surrender came in April 1992, when the union responded to company threats to bring in strikebreakers by terminating a five-and-a-half month walkout. The second took place in December 1995, when the union ordered the workers to end a 17-month strike, despite an overwhelming vote by the rank-and-file to reject the company's contract offer.

For months on end the union isolated the striking workers and left them to face company and police provocations on their own, refusing to mobilize the hundreds of thousands of UAW members at the other heavy machinery companies and the Big Three auto makers. In the second walkout, thousands of workers saw their jobs taken by strikebreakers. Thousands of others, demoralized and disgusted by the impotence and treachery of the UAW, crossed the picket line and went back to work. Those strikers who retained their jobs after the first and second walkouts faced continuous company harassment. Scores of workers were victimized and fired for strike-related activities.

Workers lost their life savings, their cars and their homes. The economic and emotional trauma undermined marriages and led not a few workers to an early grave.

The workers were fighting to defend their jobs, their living standards, and the gains won by past generations of Caterpillar workers. But the UAW bureaucracy, as demonstrated by the contract it signed, had its own agenda.

During, between, and after the strikes, the tactics and negotiating positions of the UAW were determined not by the needs of the workers, but rather by the selfish interests of the army of bureaucrats,

in the locals as well as the international union apparatus, who live off the income derived from the members' dues.

Their overriding concern was to restore the dues checkoff and defend the jobs and perks of union officials. Indeed, the secret to the UAW's decision to sign essentially the same contract that the company had been offering for years was a quid pro quo that directly involved the defense of the union bureaucracy's privileges.

As part of the deal, Caterpillar agreed to drop a case it had presented last January before the Supreme Court, in which it contended that it should no longer pay the wages of more than two dozen full-time union officials at its US plants. The company argued that such an arrangement violated federal labor laws and constituted a conflict of interest, undermining the union's role as the legal representative of the workers.

The case has vast implications not only for the UAW, but for the entire AFL-CIO. Tens, if not hundreds of thousands of bureaucrats' jobs would be at risk if the cost of maintaining full-time officials were shifted from the companies to the unions. Significantly, the Big Three auto companies sided with the UAW in the case.

Thus the first lesson workers must draw from the bitter experience at Caterpillar is the recognition that the UAW today is not an organization for the defense of the working class. It is rather an apparatus of the union bureaucracy, which is itself a distinct social layer—a corrupt and parasitic part of the upper middle class. This bureaucracy quite consciously identifies its interests with those of the employers and the capitalist system as a whole.

The very fact that Caterpillar, despite twice humiliating the UAW in the space of four years, decided to keep the union around rather than ousting it altogether, demonstrates that the company is well aware of the real allegiance of the bureaucracy. The Caterpillar bosses made a business decision to retain the union because they understand that, in the final analysis, the union works for them.

The contract voted down by the rank-and-file is proof that the UAW is an organization of, by and for the bureaucracy, deeply hostile to the interests of the workers.

What did the deal provide for the Caterpillar workers?

- Victimized workers abandoned

The UAW deserted 50 workers fired for strike-related activities,

leaving their fate in the hands of an arbitrator. These workers, each with many years on the job, would face the likelihood of being blacklisted and never finding a comparable job. The UAW also agreed to drop 440 unfair labor practice cases, including dozens in which the company had already been found guilty of harassment, threats against strikers and unsafe working conditions, and faced millions of dollars in fines.

- Three-year contract discarded

The proposed agreement was a six-year contract, expiring in February 2004. This would give management a guarantee of more than half a decade without strikes or disruptions, as it revamped its entire operation, replacing older, retiring workers with younger workers receiving lower wages and facing longer hours and intensified speedup.

- Retirees' benefits undermined

The contract allowed management to put a cap on its contribution to retiree health care benefits starting in the year 2000. This would lead to a cut in medical coverage for thousands of workers who have spent 20, 30 or 40 years in the plants, and many months on the picket lines over the past seven years.

- Flex-time scheduling introduced

Workers would no longer be paid time-and-a-half after working eight hours in a given day or for working on weekends. Instead they would receive the overtime rate only after 40 hours of work in a week. This would result in a de facto pay cut of thousands of dollars for workers who depend on overtime. Moreover, management would be able to force workers to labor 10, 12 or 14 hours a day, with an inevitable increase in on-the-job injuries, heart attacks and deaths.

- Two-tier wages

New workers would be hired in at 30 percent lower wages. Additionally, fifteen percent of the workforce in the parts and service units could be part-time and temporary employees.

- A cut in real wages

At a time when nonunion employers are being forced to grant wage increases of 5, 10 and even 15 percent because of a tight labor market and lack of skilled workers, the contract called for only one pay hike, ranging from 2 to 4 percent, and three lump sum bonuses equal to 3 percent of workers' salaries. Even with cost-of-living increases, the spending power of workers' take-home pay by the end of the contract would be significantly reduced.

- A green light for plant closings and layoffs

There was no mention of the closure of the York, Pennsylvania plant, wiping out 850 jobs, as well as a threat to close the Memphis plant. The company was also granted the right to use part-time and temporary workers to displace regular full-time workers during periods of layoffs.

What did the deal provide for the UAW bureaucrats?

- Dues check-off resumed

Caterpillar agreed to reinstate the deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks. This practice was suspended when the contract expired and the union had been forced to collect payments from workers on a voluntary basis. Many workers had become so disgusted with the UAW they simply stopped paying dues.

- Perks and privileges of union officials restored

Caterpillar agreed to eliminate limits on the amount of time in-plant committeemen can spend on "union duties," and to allow committeemen to perform union duties on an as-needed basis without losing pay. Committeemen would also accrue full service credit while performing union duties.

This shameless sellout is a testament to the partnership between the employers and the unions that has developed with particular force over the past twenty years. The bureaucracy has become increasingly conscious of its own interests and the antagonism between these interests and the elementary needs of the workers it ostensibly represents. The greater the impact of plant closures, layoffs, wage cuts and unionbusting on the working class, and the more rapid the decline in union membership, the more the bureaucracy has separated its fate from that of the workers.

There remain significant numbers of workers, particularly of the older generation, who believe they owe some allegiance to the UAW and the AFL-CIO, because they continue to identify these organizations with the militant struggles and sacrifices of the previous generations that established the unions in the first place. The truth is, the present unions exemplify everything which the most militant and politically conscious pioneers of the CIO opposed: class collaboration, corruption, bureaucracy. These organizations suppress any real expression of the democratic will of the rank-and-file. They, have, moreover, openly repudiated any connection to the class struggle traditions of the past and embraced the corporatist program of labor-management collaboration.

The degeneration of these organizations has transformed them into de facto arms of corporate management and the capitalist state, and this process has been bound up with fundamental political questions. From their inception, the AFL and then the CIO were based programmatically on a defense of the profit system and hostility to socialism. This was linked to a nationalist orientation, and embodied in the unions' political alliance with the capitalist parties, in particular, the Democrats. These policies have led the working class to a dead end.

The vote at Caterpillar expresses the fundamental conflict between the social interests of the working class and those of the labor bureaucracy. It is not simply a matter of replacing one set of union officials with another, but of breaking the hold of the bureaucracy and constructing new, genuinely democratic organizations of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program. This is the fight being taken up by the Socialist Equality Party in the US today.



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